DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 354 516 CS 213 672

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TITLE Reader-Response to Dr. Seuss: Middle School Students and Social Issues.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 93p.; Specialist in Education Project, University of Georgia.
PUB TYPE Dissertations/Theses - Undetermined (040)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC04 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Literature; Grade 7; Junior High Schools; Middle Schools; *Reader Response; Reader Text Relationship; *Reading Ability; Reading Research; *Social Problems
IDENTIFIERS *Doctor Seuss; Geisel (Theodor Seuss); *Middle School Students; Response to Literature

ABSTRACT

A study investigated to what extent average middle school students were able to perceive the social issues embedded in literature by Dr. Seuss. Seventy-four seventh-grade students responded to five Dr. Seuss stories in free-writing exercises, response worksheets, and question worksheets. Results showed that the majority of students (approximately 85%) discovered the major issues in the five stories: "The Sneetches"; "The Lorax"; "The Butter Battle Book"; "Horton Hears a Who"; and "The Cat in the Hat." Some students were able to delve more deeply into the social aspects depicted, but most at least recognized the social implications of each story, and related both personal and general ideas, showing that response was not only of a self-centered nature. (One figure of data is included; and three appendixes, containing the worksheet on reader-response and the worksheet on story questions, are attached.) (Contains 53 references.) (SR)

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READER-RESPONSE TO DR. SEUSS:
MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS AND SOCIAL ISSUES

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A Project Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment

of the

Requirements for the Degree

SPECIALIST IN EDUCATION

ATHENS, GEORGIA

1992

CS213673

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am most appreciative of Dr. Laurie Hart and Dr. Brenda Manning for their guidance and support throughout the preparation of this study.

I would also like to express my appreciation to my entire family for their support and patience: to Lori and Wade for the original project idea; to Chipper for his help in library research; to Bruce for "long distance" research; to Tai and Meili for constant companionship during many late nights; to Missy and Chuck for continued support and encouragement; to my mother for meals that otherwise would have been missed; and especially to my daddy, for endless hours of typing and editing.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the question: Do student reader responses to Dr. Seuss books indicate an awareness of the social issues present in this literature? This review encompassed several areas of interest in connection with the stated question. The literature on reader-response theory was reviewed and Dr. Seuss literature was examined both historically and in terms of use in a school setting.

An additiional purpose of this project was to use reader-response to literature to obtain knowledge concerning seventh grade students. By using the literary works of Dr. Seuss, the students were to develop not only in their literary knowledge, but in social areas as well. Dr. Seuss wrote with hidden social messages embedded in his work. It was the purpose of this project to determine to what extent average middle school students could discern this information. This knowledge could help a middle school teacher more fully understand the students and their perceptions of society.

A further reason for this study was concern for reading comprehension. Psycholinguists and cognitive psychologists stated that comprehension in reading is affected by the ways in which students' prior knowledge and expectations interact with the material they read (Cullinan, 1989). According to Smith (Cullinan, 1989) reading is a creation in the mind of the reader in interaction with the text. Using reader-response to literature enhanced these views toward comprehension. The reader's interaction with the material was the vital component to this approach.

"Reader-response critics have argued...that we also bring assumptions to our reading....These expectations, biases, and assumptions usually disguise themselves as universal truths, or at least as `the way things ought to be'" (Anderson, 1991, p. 141). The Dr. Seuss literature seemed at first reading the way things "ought to be"--amusing, comical, refreshing--but there are social elements which need to come to light if a full understanding is to be achieved. Through reader-response, it was intended that these universal truths be revealed and reflected upon by students.

Terminology

Several terms must be defined in order to offer a clear understanding of the material presented. Social issues are those ideas which are related to human society. These issues are created through relationships developed among members of the human population. The social issues under consideration in this study are those found in the literature of Dr. Seuss. Reader-response is the method used in teaching literature which connects the students' prior experiences with a text through a written response (Rosenblatt, 1938). The students respond to selected literature in a free manner in which they are encouraged to express their own feelings concerning the material. This teaching method will be incorporated into this study.

Reader-Response and Social Issues

This writer attempted to combine reader-response in a compatible manner with social issues to help develop the awareness of students. Rosenblatt (1938) posited that students should be helped to handle their responses to the political and social tendencies in

literature since an attitude toward a work's social implications is relevant. She also suggested that literature is a rejection of stereotypical and superficial reactions to situations and that the reading of a variety of authors should provide fresh insight. The literature of Dr. Seuss was used as a source to gain the reactions of students by using reader-response. Evaluative techniques to determine this reaction are discussed in the next section.

Evaluation

The work of Petrosky (1982) was used as a basis for evaluations offered in this study since he believed that students should be asked to give written responses to the texts that they read and that reading, responding, and composing are all aspects of understanding. Petrosky stated that there was "compelling evidence to support the claim that comprehension...is a function of the reader's prior knowledge, the text, and the context" (Petrosky, 1982, p. 21). His work emphasizes that reading should be taught without the pressures of recall. His ideas teach that what we read develop a student's

interpretations and opinions derived from both the texts and the student's own life. In the process of composing, the readers need to be able to express and explain connections between their previous knowledge and the texts they read (Petrosky, 1982). This study attempts to examine the joining of these two areas through reader-response--by connecting previous knowledge dealing with social issues to Dr. Seuss' literature.

Petrosky (1982) suggested the use of a response approach based on the work of Bleich. Petrosky saw this approach as a good starting point for students to write about their interpretation of a text. The response worksheet found in Appendix A incorporated Bleich's ideas on guiding the responses of students (Petrosky, 1982).

Another researcher was also used as a guide to the development of response procedures for this study. Probst (1984) defined reading as "an experience that shapes, perhaps confirming attitudes and ideas, perhaps modifying or refuting them" (Probst, 1984, p. 24). He emphasized the importance of teacher acceptance in a response activity so that students feel secure in their

responses and are willing to express thoughts and feelings, or to change their minds.

Probst (1984) felt that a teacher should put little pressure on the students so that their responses would be their own. He suggested that this be achieved by having students note their first response prior to any group discussion. This insures that students' responses are their own. Probst also felt that some guidance on the teacher's part might be needed as a second step. The teacher might pursue certain directions with questioning techniques. "Constraints on responses may inhibit the reader, but direction can help students discover their own route into the literature" (Probst, 1984, p. 46).

Dr. Seuss

Due to the familiarity of this literature to most students by middle school age, Dr. Seuss books were chosen as a basis for this project. The stories of Dr. Seuss may be one of the earliest experiences that children have encountered with reading. As will be discussed in detail elsewhere in this paper, Dr. Seuss' stories are embedded with critical social issues such

as racial prejudice, abortion, resistance to authority, pollution, politics, nuclear war, dependency on nature, dictatorship, and old age. These issues are necessarily a part of the culture of today's students. This study uses the responses of seventh graders to focus on society and some of its issues.

It is hoped that the use of literature by Dr. Seuss helped the students who participated in this project to gain some insight into social issues and into their own values concerning society. Clifford (1991), using Rosenblatt's ideas, stated that readers who become aware of alternative social patterns will be able to make choices in the future that may cause change in the world: "... readers who might choose, citizens who might act..." (Clifford, 1991, p. 4). This social knowledge and use of it was encouraged by increased understanding of the students' social world in the classes involved in this project.

This project attempted to awaken students to the social issues in our society. It seemed, according to Adams and Bruce (Beach, 1983), that attitudes influence reading rather than reading influencing attitudes. This project attempted to simply make students more

aware of their own attitudes and the ways in which social beliefs were seen through literature. As Beach (1983) explained, the characters in literature become unusual if their behavior is not conventional. The characters act in certain predictable ways and a reader infers that their behavior is governed by certain social roles (Beach, 1983).

> The characters in Dr. Seuss' works aroused curiosity and caused the reader to recognize that certain social issues were under debate. The students' attitudes and background determined the extent to which the social mores were recognized and were accepted or rejected. Social attitudes are reflected in the author's choice of the nature of the problem (foreign invaders, an evil villain, a technological breakthrough--each representing social attitudes or fears), the nature of the hero, the means the hero uses to deal with the problem, and the nature of the resolution. (p. 53)

Students in the present study were exposed to the social issues of Dr. Seuss. Dr. Seuss' attitudes were reflected in his literature. It will be determined if

Dr. Seuss' beliefs were recognized by seventh grade students in this researcher's study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In her book Women Teaching For Change (1988), Weiler used the concept of "voice" (Weiler, 1988, p. xii) to study the ways that teachers and learners interact and the knowledge they both bring to the classroom, as well as the knowledge they produce jointly. She maintained the position that students need more than theory to perceive their world. Teachers and students form an "asymmetrical" (Weiler, 1988, p. xii) relationship of power, which produces understanding in the classroom. Weiler's theory concerned the ways in which students and teachers produce and exchange knowledge, values, and cultural ideas.

These ideas from Weiler (1988) formed a basis for the use of a reader-response approach for the teaching of literature. A child's prior knowledge is evident in both the relationship proposed by Weiler and in reader-response. A teacher may use student responses to learn

more about and further develop a meaningful relationship with students.

Another reason to introduce social issues to students is discussed by Gramsci. Gramsci insisted that readers are not passive learners and that knowledge is an interaction between the student and teacher (Weiler, 1988). Individuals must become conscious of their own function in the world (Weiler, 1988) and teachers and students are both involved in this awakening. An understanding of our own society must be introduced to students through teachers who respect the culture of their students and allow articulation of the students' own beliefs. The Dr. Seuss literature presented in this project will help students understand society as applied to their own interpretations of the world. Reader-response helps in the expression of these interpretations. Perhaps this understanding may encourage students to discover their own values and to attempt to change necessary elements in society at large.

Studies Related to Reader-Response

Because there has been a limited amount of research conducted about Dr. Seuss and his influence on literature, the studies cited in this review dealt with reader-response in general rather than in connection with Seuss. Historical information on Dr. Seuss and his influence on education was available also. Specific details related to the Seuss books used in this current action research study are provided. These Seuss books were The Cat In The Hat (1957), The Sneetches and Other Stories (1961), The Lorax (1971), The Butter Battle Book (1984), and Horton Hears A Who (1954).

In the preparation of this review, several search techniques were employed. A manual search using the card catalog and a GALIN computer search were used to gain information. A computer based ERIC search was conducted, as well as a search through dissertation abstracts. The ERIC descriptors used were reader-response, Seuss, and audience-response. There were ten locations in ERIC involving these terms, two of which were used. Seven dissertation abstracts were checked

for possible inclusion in this review. Two of these were related to the topic in this project.

The two studies which will be included in this section were the only studies found that were closely related to the question under study. In her dissertation at New York University, Higgins (1987) studied written and oral responses of female college students to four short stories. The reason for the inclusion of this dissertation was due to the conclusion which was drawn: that only methods of qualitative research can provide data appropriate to reader-response study. Since a qualitative research design will be incorporated into this researcher's project, this finding offers corroboration of methodology. Although this study dealt with students older than middle school, it may still be applicable to this study since a response base was used. Sixteen female student volunteers participated in this study and four responses were given by each participant. Volunteers are somewhat suspect in research studies due to their tendency to be better educated, more intelligent, and of a higher social class (Borg, 1987), than samples chosen randomly. This researcher does not

believe that the use of volunteers influenced the conclusions of Higgins' study since college students are, as a whole, well-educated and intelligent. After short stories were presented, the students responded anonymously and a method of content analysis was used to analyze the responses.

A second study was conducted by Kearney (1987) at New York University. Kearney (1987) described and analyzed the processes involved in developing, teaching, and learning literature in a seventh grade classroom according to a reader-response approach. Since Kearney's study dealt with the seventh grade, which is also the age level considered for this project, Kearney's study may be especially relevant. One teacher and four students collaborated with the researcher in a year-long classroom study. The length of time employed seemed adequate. Data were gathered through classroom observations, interviews, student and teacher writing and interaction, and student-student interaction. Out of eight findings, most dealing with the teacher (which was not relevant to this study), one finding seemed conceptually linked to the project underway: students grew in self-confidence as they

engaged in reader-response activities. A gain in self-confidence could affect a student's response, especially when social concerns are under consideration as in the Dr. Seuss' project. Self-confidence could insure additional freedom in a student's feelings towards opening up with response.

These studies offered some insight into the descriptive research techniques applicable to the classroom. The actual dissertations were not available for study; therefore, information was recorded from the abstracts.

Reader-Response Perspectives and Comments

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, which financed a study of middle school writing, one reason for poor writing was that little time was spent on writing in the classroom (Henry, 1992). Classroom teachers need to focus on research of this type and incorporate solutions into the students' curriculum. Writing to learn focuses upon an active role rather than a passive approach to learning (Mayher, Lester, & Pradl, 1983). Writers and readers work in conjunction with one another combining reading

and writing (Atwell, 1987). By using a reader-response approach to literature, reading and writing could serve a dual role in students' educational progress.

Another perspective towards reader-response deals with the idea that the parts of literary theory revolve around three areas--the author, the text, and the reader (Moffett & Wagner, 1992). Thus, reader-response, a combination of these three areas, is important in an educational experience for students. Reader-response theories are not tied to any single philosophical starting point. What they have in common is a focus on the reader's contribution to the meaning of a text (Gilbert, 1987).

Proponents of reader-response believe that students become more actively involved in reading when they are led to see that they have a role in determining the meaning (Brozo, 1988). Students may be more willing to read and write when they can see that their work is relevant to their own interests and lives. The text becomes meaningful when a personal connection occurs. This connection can be seen when issues in the Dr. Seuss literature can relate to a student's own life. Also of importance is the data

from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (1982) which suggested that reading comprehension increases when children read more frequently. Since understanding a text deals with students' interests and attitudes, reader-response must be interwoven with comprehension of literature. Students may be more willing to read when a clear understanding is gained. Reader-response can help develop this understanding since the students' own thoughts and feelings are recorded. To better focus upon this idea, two experts on reader-response theory will be discussed in the following sections.

Rosenblatt

In Rosenblatt's explanation of readers and their responses, she developed what she called the transactional theory of reading (Allen, 1991). The literary work was not an object, but an experience shaped by the reader with guidance from the text (Allen, 1991). Rosenblatt's work was highlighted by the idea that a unique experience occurs "when particular people read a particular text at a particular moment in time" (Allen, 1991, p. 20).

Rosenblatt's ideas were somewhat ahead of her time, as pointed out by Clifford (1991). Rosenblatt shared a concern of English teachers. This concern is that the study of literature is related to the child's social life and reading is a social act (Clifford, 1991). This idea relates directly to the project at hand dealing with social issues discussed through literature.

English teachers, Rosenblatt keeps reminding us, can contribute in an important way to creating the character of future citizens (Pradl, 1991). Rosenblatt (1978) said that students should make reading their own and should not be ready to willingly accept someone else's judgment about their own ideas concerning literature. If children have lived through an experience and are able to relate this situation with a response to literature, the work is their own--a meaningful and useful way in which to use literature in a classroom. Rosenblatt's concern should be a signal to teachers--students should not retain a defeatist attitude toward literature, but should learn to accept their own responses as responsible and worthy. Squire (1990) confirmed the importance of

Rosenblatt's ideas. He posited that her literary theory has influenced virtually all subsequent researchers and research related to books and readers (Squire, 1990).

Rosenblatt differentiates between efferent (asking for specific informational recall) and aesthetic (expression of feeling) reading (Galda, 1988). This distinction has direct implications for classroom instruction in that Rosenblatt believes that the types of questions often asked encourage efferent rather than aesthetic reading, for example the typical questions of the "who, what, when, where, why" variety asked simply for information which is derived from the text. The interpretation and evaluation questions often are not requested by teachers. When these questions are used, they sometimes only mirror the author's ideas. In order to promote aesthetic reading, the content and some of the reader's prior knowledge must be taken into account. It should be realized that these concepts are aesthetically important. Reader-response may help afford this opportunity to students.

Rosenblatt (1938) discussed the adolescent in relation to society. She asked what a student of this

age might bring to literature and described the presence of conflicts in adolescents. This project attempted to diffuse these concerns through better understanding by using social issues raised in Dr. Seuss' literature. These aspects of society, authority figures, civil and minority rights, environmentalism, and war are most likely evident to adults, but to middle school age children, the issues may be only "emotional realities behind the world of appearances" (Rosenblatt, 1938, p. 87).

Since publication in 1938, Rosenblatt's Literature of Exploration has furnished the theoretical basis in the teaching of literature (Farrell, 1963). Rosenblatt's viewpoint concerning interaction between the reader and literature is a guide to the understanding of reader-response. She places readers into important and active roles with the literature, with meaning coming from both sides. Reader-response "is a circular process in which the reader responds to the words on the page and at the same time draws upon personal experiences in order to create individual meaning" (Cullinan, 1989, p. 46). As Pradl (1991) pointed out, Rosenblatt's ideas mirror the key points

of Dewey's beliefs that freedom and self-expression must be learned and that intellectual curiosity must be encouraged. A student's responses can only mature through the encouragement of the teacher.

Rosenblatt's concept of reader-response deals with the idea that readers come to a text with a set of preconceptions and concerns based on their own experiences in life (Purves, 1991). A basic point in her theory is an active use of prior knowledge when reading literature. When a reader engages in reading, various preconceptions bear upon the text. These preconceptions deal with both the content and form of the text. Rosenblatt maintained that the way in which readers read a particular work depends upon what they already know and feel, as well as the meaning and emotion gained from the actual literature. A reader's understanding is both social and cultural (Purves, 1991). This social understanding will be of consideration in dealing with Dr. Seuss' literature and reader-response with seventh-graders.

Galda

Galda is another important figure in reader-response theory. Galda (1988) states that a spectator stance is assumed by a reader when interacting with a literary text. The reader is a spectator in the sense that the judgments or decisions made while engaged in reading do not have real-life consequences. The reader is, therefore, able to explore another's symbolized experience (Galda, 1988). The text may be interpreted from the readers' individual viewpoint which allows them to evaluate in a broader sense (Galda, 1988). As Galda further explained, the reader infuses meaning into the symbols on a page and actively creates meaning that is enhanced as the story progresses. The text stimulates this meaning, but does not necessarily dictate it (Galda, 1988).

Galda (1988) suggested that readers of all ages engage in active transactions with literary texts, which was what theory had proposed and research had acknowledged. Studies undertaken showed that factors within the readers themselves influence the response they give to literature. The experiences people have influence their perception of the world. Galda (1988)

believes that readers have a characteristic manner of responding which is linked to their personalities and which holds across texts. Galda related in Purves' work that this preference for response may have been a learned behavior as well as a preference (Galda, 1988). Classroom experiences may have altered in a significant manner the responses that were given. For instance, if a teacher consistently questions in a certain way, the same type of responses may continue to be used by students even when a different response would be more effective. Galda (1988) stressed that reader-based influences also include gender, personal preferences, expectations for reading, reading ability, and past literary experiences. Cognitive development is also a factor which plays a role in the way a reader responds. The stage to which students have progressed in terms of formal operational thought influences their ability to respond in terms of reality (Galda, 1988).

Other factors influence responses also, according to Galda (1988). These factors are: the age of the reader, the conceptualization of the story, the degree of abstraction in the text, and the ability to analyze

the characters. These findings were based on studies in response by researchers such as Hickman, Pillar, Applebee, and Galda (Galda, 1988).

Conclusions

Although there are various ways to study reader-response, the students and their interactions with literature should be of primary consideration in all theories. Purves stated that the center of the curriculum is not a work of literature, but the mind as it works with the book--the response (Cooper & Odell, 1976). Therefore, for teachers, a primary consideration may need to be students' responses to what they read--their reactions, perceptions, interpretations, and value judgments. Teachers may need to show more openness and readiness to react to the response of the students. One needs to consider that any single response may not necessarily be preferable to another. A teacher should be willing to take into account the experience and influences under which students operate. Reader-response could be a most useful tool in the teaching of literature and a way in which to view literary works with new and added

meaning. The importance to students seems to be captured by Murray (1969): "...for when we discover what we have said we discover who we are" (p. 911).

A review of literature pertaining to the specific literary works used for this project follows, along with a historical view of Dr. Seuss. This researcher believes that the issues in Dr. Seuss' work can better be understood through a look at Seuss' background and his literature. The Dr. Seuss books discussed in terms of their social issues will be The Cat In The Hat, The Sneetches, The Lorax, The Butter Battle Book, and Horton Hears A Who.

The Literature of Dr. Seuss

History

In this portion of the review of literature the life and writing of Theodor Seuss Geisel, better known in the literary world as "Dr. Seuss", are examined. As an author dedicated to the world of children's literature, Dr. Seuss made a lasting name for himself through his innovative methods of writing. Although pondering the idea of writing for adults, Seuss lost interest in this endeavor and came to realize that his audience was children. To express his sentiments on his preference in writing for children, he said, "'Adults are obsolete children, and the hell with them'" (Kanfer, 1991, p.71).

Seuss delighted children from his first book until his last, with some 43 in between. He capably combined the ridiculous and the logical, and usually taught a lesson in the meantime. Although beloved by his audience, he was not entirely welcomed by the children's literature establishment (Roth, 1989) until fairly recently. This researcher attempted to examine

the life, work, and criticism of Dr. Seuss, along with his social beliefs communicated through literature.

Dr. Seuss made an indelible mark on literature for years past and to come. He used his writing to convey themes of social importance. Dr. Seuss was a writer concerned with more than pure entertainment. He must be considered a force in literature and a topic worthy of discussion when literary concerns are engaged.

Dr. Seuss was born March 2, 1904, in Springfield, Massachusetts and died in September 1991. Geisel also used the name Theo Le Seig for some of his work.

Geisel began his education in the public schools of Springfield, Illinois. His father, Theodor G. Geisel, became president of a Springfield brewery the day prohibition was declared. Young Geisel had been destined to follow in his father's footsteps, but this turn of events led him in a different direction. His father went on to become the superintendent of Springfield parks and zoo. His father's occupation definitely influenced young Geisel's life; his visits to the zoo inspired his later creative endeavors that included many imaginary animals.

Geisel's father became a philanthropist and helped many people in a worthwhile way. This aspect of his father's life, along with his disillusionment with the world of business, may have had a profound effect on young Geisel (Roth, 1989).

Geisel was somewhat of a loner and outsider during his early years. While an adolescent, the United States was involved in World War I and citizens were angry with the Germans. "`I was not only known as the Kaiser, but because of my father's job at the brewery, the Drunken Kaiser. I sometimes fled home with coals bouncing off my head'" (Wilder, 1979, p. 62), said Geisel. These incidents may have influenced his later writings, as did his experiences at the zoo.

After graduation from Dartmouth in 1925, Geisel went to Oxford to continue his studies. He became disillusioned with his efforts abroad and found himself to the point of decorating his notes with flying cows (possibly an indication of things to come). He then wed Helen Palmer and returned to the United States soon afterward--just in time for the Depression. Geisel tried to write serious novels, but was not suited to this literary pursuit. He began contributing humorous

material to various magazines and was then hired by an advertising agency to write slogans.

Frustration on Geisel's part motivated his career as a children's author. Since he was under contract with the advertising agency, Geisel could not freelance in any other field. But children's literature was not included in the ban and, thus, And To Think That I Saw It On Mulberry Street was written in 1937. This manuscript was rejected by numerous publishers and was only saved by a chance meeting between Geisel and an old friend who had been made juvenile editor for Vanguard Press that very day. "Dr. Seuss" was born and Geisel's literary profession was begun. This book opened the doorway to children's literature for Theodor Geisel and the world of Dr. Seuss readers.

Geisel's one and only attempt at adult literature was then undertaken and it was described by Seuss himself as a most expensive failure in his career (See, 1974). This work was titled The Seven Lady Godivas and was not successful on any front. With the failure of this book, Geisel turned his attention to the war efforts.

During the war, Geisel produced documentaries on Germany and Japan, while stationed in a commandeered Hollywood movie studio. His films "Hitler Lives" and "Design For Death" won Academy Awards in 1946 and 1947, and his cartoon "Gerald McBoing Boing" won an Oscar in 1951. He also "invented the atomic bomb" (See, 1974, p. 176) at this time. Geisel had read an article on the amount of energy contained in a glass of water, and he wrote a scenario around the fact that this much energy could produce a bomb. The Pentagon was extremely upset over this piece. Geisel was ordered to destroy his source of information (See, 1974). Geisel also created racy cartoons that were shown only to service personnel as part of the Army-Navy Screen Magazine and were primarily propaganda showing a goofy soldier ("Private Snafu") performing menial tasks while obeying orders (Fox, 1991).

These are just a few examples of Seuss' creativity and sense of humor. With the war coming to an end, a "baby boom" took place and new readers were supplied for Dr. Seuss and his creations.

New Reading Methods

Seuss began writing books to be used as reading primers due to an article in LIFE magazine in 1954. The article (Hersey, 1954) complained about the "dreariness" of the primers currently in use in schools. Hersey mentioned that an author like Seuss could produce more exciting material for these beginning readers. Three years later Seuss published The Cat In The Hat to be used in this way with children and the career of Dr. Seuss was truly launched.

The Cat In The Hat began a new genre. This book used the Dolch vocabulary list of 220 words that a first grader was expected to know. Seuss was most proud of this book because, as he said, "It had something to do with the death of `Dick and Jane'" (Cott, 1983, p. 25). Although this first attempt was not well received by schools, it was very successful in the bookstores. Seuss felt that "`The Cat In The Hat was the most useful book I ever wrote, for its use in schools, stimulating reading'" (Roback, 1990, p. 126). This book, similar in nature to And To Think That I Saw It On Mulberry Street, used imagination--this time as a way to resist authority (Roth, 1989). The Cat invited

children to misbehave while their parents were away and to experience freedom from adult rules. The empowerment of children was shown, but only in imaginary sequences.

Seuss has been given credit with revolutionizing the teaching of reading by managing to create innovative comic tales with a minimum vocabulary. The inventiveness of these books and their freedom from class and race norms made middle-class suburban Dick and Jane look prejudiced and outdated (Lurie, 1990).

The Beginners Books, as this division of Random House was called, were successful because they were "fun" (Fleischer, 1968, p. 8). They were used both as primers and as remedial readers in the upper grades. Their humor and abstract qualities were appreciated by readers of all ages.

> But the books of Dr. Seuss are not simply popular. They are written in dead earnest, with a serious though sketchy theory of reading behind them, and they have been recognized as important contributions to children's literature. (Greenleaf, 1982, p. 6)

Dr. Seuss deserves credit towards the education of children. The Beginners Books gave children a source of pleasure as well as helping them achieve literacy. Dr. Seuss had definite ideas on certain aspects of reading. On the question of the motivation of children to want to read, he said that parents are primarily responsible. The school and the parents should both motivate the child to read (Sadler, 1989). Seuss also felt that determining that kids are capable of only learning a certain number of words was unwarranted (Wilder, 1979). He felt that children of today could read on a higher level than their parents could (Wilder, 1979, pp.27, 64). Dr. Seuss was innovative in his approach to reading and his impact was unquestionable.

Critics

There were those critics, however, who felt that Dr. Seuss was less than phenomenal in his writing. MacDonald (1988), suggested that the Beginners Books represent a beginning to an end. In 1965, Bailey viewed the Beginners Books as the onset of a marketing approach by Dr. Seuss to boost output and that other

books were written for strictly commercial reasons (MacDonald, 1988). This caused a loss of the intimacy and friendliness which endeared him to both children and parents (MacDonald, 1988).

Librarians and teachers have not always been pleased with the themes which run through Seuss' work. His Beginners Books met considerable resistance due to their frivolity and subversiveness (Lingeman, 1976). Seuss was also criticized by feminists for his perspectives on women with such lines as "Even Jane could have thought of it" from To Think That I Saw It On Mulberry Street. Further social issues will be discussed later in this review of literature.

Seuss' Message

Dr. Seuss' works were divided into three distinct time periods according to Fudge (1968). Seuss' lack of employment and subsequent success with his first book instigated the first period from 1937 to 1947. These books showed a variety of purposes, while the second period (1948-1959) seemed to be divided into social commentaries and books dealing with a boy's

imagination. The third period tended to reflect books for more of a sense of enjoyment in reading.

The power of the individual to relate to the world, and have control over it, was evident in Seuss' books. He encouraged wild invention and liberal use of one's own imagination. An encouragement of the mastery of independence for children and a message of empowerment for all humans was illustrated throughout Seuss' works.

Seuss delivered a message about the power of the human mind to create interesting and marvelous thoughts (MacDonald, 1988). Dr. Seuss wanted children to come away from his books with a positive self-image and a sense that children have some say-so in their own destiny. One of the beliefs that Dr. Seuss seems to have about his original audience was that baby-boomers break rules in order to re-create institutions in forms more to their liking (MacDonald, 1988). Seuss believed that fantasy is only an extension of reality and he used this belief in all of his work (Wilder, 1979). Fantasy seemed at first to pervade Seuss' stories, but there was an underlying relationship to the world of reality that the reader recognized. This capability by

Seuss to entertain and at the same time, convey the importance of the message in the work, has made him successful in the world of literature.

"Imagination," said Wordsworth, "is but another name for absolute power and clearest insight, amplitude of the mind, and reason in her most exalted mood" (Cott, 1983, p. 13). The idea that imagination equates with power could well be the basis for some of Dr. Seuss' works. Cott (1983) thought that imagination allowed for and created the possibility for things to happen and to change. Seuss also believed in this connection between imagination and power. He believed that "flexibility of thinking" and "brightness" (Cott, 1983) are a large part of achievement and traits by which societal changes can be made. In the world of Seuss, the desire for something to happen is only limited by an individual's patience and imagination (Cott, 1983).

Social Issues in the Dr. Seuss Literature

Dr. Seuss addressed many social issues through his literature: racial prejudice and equality, ecology, nuclear war, dictatorship, old age, commercialism, abortion, minority rights, crooked politics, the Vietnam War, and even the meaning of life. The social topics in Seuss' books that are related to this project will be discussed.

The Sneetches. Views on racial equality were demonstrated by Seuss through his lack of recognizably ethnic faces to the human characters in his books (Lingeman, 1976). Seuss believed that racially identifiable features on his characters might result in stereotypical characterizations. Thus, a variety of animals throughout his books depict the variance in races rather than ethnic qualities. These animals are typically "asocial" and "apolitical" (Lingeman, 1976, p. 48).

Racial prejudice was dealt with in detail in The Sneetches. Seuss said that The Sneetches was inspired by his opposition to anti-Semitism (Cott, 1983). Some saw the activities reflected in The Sneetches as only

"snobbishness" but Johnson (1988) strongly believed that Seuss intended this book to express views on racial prejudice. Johnson grew up in Georgia in the 1950's and 60's and questioned the segregationist teachings of his elders (Johnson, 1988). He was taught that white people and black people were basically different and it was not until reading The Sneetches that he fully understood this misinformation.

The Sneetches' society was based on segregation according to whether or not these creatures had stars on their bellies. Sylvester McMonkey McBean arrived with a machine that added stars to bellies and, of course, the Plain-belly Sneetches quickly paid him money to add this feature to their bodies. Now, a dilemma arose--the Star-belly Sneetches were no longer different and were unable to tell why they were better. McBean solved this problem with another machine to remove the stars. And, with this development, the Sneetches decided that "Sneetches are Sneetches, And no kind of Sneetch is best on the beaches" (Seuss, 1961, p. 24).

The Sneetches was published in 1961 in the midst of the civil rights movement. Seuss was saying that

you should not judge people by so trivial a thing as whether they had stars--or black or white skin (Johnson, 1988). In his book, Seuss gave an indictment of racism. Seuss recognized how deeply embedded the belief of otherness was in society (Mensch & Freeman 1987).

Seuss' idea for this story on society's views on race may have stemmed from his own persecution as a German during his boyhood. He knew first-hand the hurt associated with being considered different. The theme of The Sneetches, that everyone was equal, proved to be a personal expression by Dr. Seuss.

The Lorax. The theme of ecology and the destruction of our world is evident in Dr. Seuss' works. The Lorax (1971) is an example of writing with this concern in mind. Seuss' ideas have caused some controversy, however, as indicated in opposition shown by California loggers. Although Seuss said The Lorax was about conservation in general, the loggers saw it as blatant propaganda and banned it from the area schools' required reading list (Lurie, 1990). Although some opposition has been demonstrated, The Lorax

provides a worthwhile look at the problems of the destruction of the earth.

Dr. Seuss said that one of his reasons for writing The Lorax was his anger over the dullness of ecology books he had read. He attempted to attack what he thought were evil things (Cott, 1983). In The Lorax he chose as his theme the consumption of stream and forest (Kanfer, 1990). Dr. Seuss considered The Lorax one of his best works, although he admitted that he was preaching which was not usually the case in his works (Roback, 1990).

In this story, greed was shown to take precedence over environmental responsibility. The story portrayed the effects of environmental destruction with little hope. The hermit that was once a proud capitalist caused his own downfall through his greediness. The "Truffula Trees" were destroyed along with the animals that once depended on them, and pollution resulted. This ecological theme was one of serious despair and actually one for the adult mind to ponder. A child would be more inclined to see that all living things are dependent upon each other and that we, as a society, must be careful to preserve the ecosystem.

The Butter Battle Book. Another book with issues central to a harmonious society was The Butter Battle Book (Seuss, 1984). After some criticism over this book, Seuss denied any intentions of using the story to alarm children by its content or to impose his own beliefs on society. But some did not accept this attitude. Crichton (1984) stated that Dr. Seuss was disguising a "social message" in The Butter Battle Book just as he did in numerous other works. This book spoke of the dangers of a nuclear arms race. Its publication in 1984 caused critics to question its lack of a happy ending, as was so characteristic of most of Seuss' work. Dr. Seuss defended this criticism saying that a happy ending would have been dishonest since the true situation was depicted (Crichton, 1984). The question was brought up concerning a sequel to The Butter Battle Book and Seuss answered by saying that the time (1984) was not right for a sequel.

In The Butter Battle Book the "Yooks" ate their bread with the butter side down while the "Zooks" preferred their bread with butter on the top. This seemingly minor difference divided these groups of flightless birds with hatred and passion. The two

groups paraded past a wall that divided them in order to flaunt their weapons. At the end of the book, the "Boys in the Back Rooms" of both the Yooks and the Zooks invented a bomb called the "Big Boy Boomeroo", and this resulted in a stand-off by both sides as they glared at each other--and waited. The closing line reads: "We'll see. We will see ..." (Seuss, 1984).

The situation presented in this book did not call for a happy ending. The critics and educators who felt that this was a fault were comparing The Butter Battle Book with books like The Cat In The Hat from 1957. The world in 1984 was not the same world that existed in 1957 and this modern societal problem could not be dealt with in the same framework as problems in the 1950's. This book showed that people could be different without being enemies and that, basically, people are all the same. This might have been the theme on which a child reader would focus rather than on the more serious issue concerned with war. There was no violence in the book; no shots rang out. The "waiting game" was being played and the conclusion in this paper was that the ending in The Butter Battle Book was the only one appropriate. Even Dr. Seuss

claimed that posing any ending would make the book propagandistic and unrealistic, since the answer in real life is not at all clear (MacDonald, 1988).

Horton Hears A Who. The relationship in Horton Hears A Who to the issue of minorities was rather evident. Along with the theme of the rights of the unborn were the rights of minorities. The tiny creatures that Horton, an elephant, protected had built an entire city on a single speck of dust. It may sometimes seem to groups of minorities that they have as little power as a speck of dust, but this should not be the case, as evidenced in Horton Hears A Who. Horton's tiny group was just as important as any other group, regardless of size, influence, or powerful connections. As the book stated: "A person's a person, no matter how small"(Seuss, 1954, p. 4) which most likely related to minorities and the lack of empowerment that they felt. To better understand the theme in Horton Hears a Who , it was interesting to note that the book was conceived by Seuss as the "result of a trip...to postwar Japan, where he was

impressed by a people trying to find a voice and make it known" (Fudge, 1968, p. 92-93).

The Cat In The Hat. The Cat In The Hat (1957), which was also used with the research conducted, was discussed previously under the heading dealing with new reading methods.

Dr. Seuss' Perspectives

When Dr. Seuss was interviewed and questioned on his ability to dismiss the reality of the world in his books, he answered with:

> ... there is no way you can shut out those facts unless you are insane. Perhaps they permeate the work and color in some particular way, but there is no magic way you can shut the doors on all these things. We don't work in `any fairy land' when we're doing books for children....In fact, real life should be in the book. It has to permeate the work. I live in this world. (Sadler, 1989, p. 588)

Dr. Seuss went beyond well-established boundaries to provide a voice of opposition and possibility. He showed opposition to the established order and possibility for social change (Roth, 1989).

Dr. Seuss contributed an endless wealth of ideas to the children of the world. His stories represented alternative courses of action that may have brought about change, issues of control and power, and common sense ways to enrich our lives, basically through the use of imagination (Roth, 1989). The themes in his works show Seuss as an author who deleted conventional boundaries. He was concerned with the powerlessness of young children and the older generation (Mensch & Freeman, 1987).

There were many tales beneath the surface in the Seuss books. Adults and adolescents have been able to see the hidden social aspects while young children viewed the nonsense rhymes and humorous situations at face value. Dr. Seuss gave a dignity and interest to the field of children's literature that it lacked prior to his entry into it. Seuss remained a child in his views toward fun and imagination, while proclaiming

adult values at the same time. His gift to children and adults alike was priceless.

> Geisel's vision may be prismatic and astigmatic, but his abnormality doesn't trouble him a bit. Not when he observes what passes for normal these days. `The more I watch people in so-called real life, the less nutty I think I am. I've never put a baseball mitt on one hand and an American Express card in the other and stood in the middle of a football field and waited for people to drop Cabbage patch dolls on my head. That happens in real life. I think I get more normal every day.' (Crichton, 1984, p.23)

Conclusions

The findings in this review of literature supported the idea that reader-response is a viable method to use in literary studies with middle school students. The beliefs held by several noted researchers reinforced the contention that students are able to foster their education by relating their

previous knowledge and experiences to current literary endeavors in the classroom.

The use of Dr. Seuss was a novel approach to engage the interest and creativity of the middle school age child. This author pointed out the purposes that Dr. Seuss had for his literature in the educational process. The various social aspects embedded within certain of his works have been revealed. The action research which will now be presented will acknowledge reader-response as a tool to help students discover the world of Dr. Seuss in order to better understand society and its issues.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Curriculum

The students who participated in this project were seventh graders at Carver Junior High in Monroe, Georgia. Since the researcher was their English teacher, the research was done in keeping with the prescribed curriculum for these students.

Literature was an integral portion of the curriculum noted for this level in the Quality Core Curriculum objectives used by the Walton County school system. The student objectives relating to this unit of literary study were:

1) Listens and responds to various forms of literature such as prose, poetry, and drama;

2) Demonstrates an awareness and appreciation of the richness and diversity of language;

3) Interprets information presented orally;

4) Reads a variety of materials for information and pleasure;

5) Recognizes explicit and implicit main ideas, details, sequence of events, and cause-effect relationships;

6) Draws conclusions and makes comparisons, predictions, and generalizations;

7) Experiences traditional and contemporary literature;

8) Recognizes various literary forms;

9) Recognizes purpose in literary selections;

10) Makes personal judgments about literature;

11) Describes cultures and values represented in literature;

12) Responds creatively to literature;

13) Recognizes that literature reflects human experiences.

At the time of the research, the language arts classes at Carver Junior High were leveled into three divisions within each grade. The top level included students with strong academic skills who were capable of a heavy workload. The middle level was geared toward students who are capable of the basic skills required for their grade level with an average output of work. The lower level classes included those

students who proved to be below grade level and who needed a more individualized approach in their studies as well as a reduced workload.

Subjects

Seventy-four students took part in the research for this project. There were twenty-four black students, forty-nine white students, and one of another race. Thirty-eight boys and thirty-six girls took part. The students who participated were in four average classes. Reading comprehension scores were gathered on these students to insure that most were actually placed in the level coordinating with their ability in the language arts area. The stanine scores on the reading comprehension section of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills for the most recent administration of this test were used for each individual student (Figure 1).

As the scores determined, the majority of students in the researcher's English classes were "average" according to standardized testing stanines. Percentages calculated corroborated the groupings of

STANINE		NUMBER OF STUDENTS
1		0
2	low	6
3		7
4		23
5	average	18
6		11
7		4
8	high	0
9		0

(Scores not available for 5 students)

From: The Iowa Test of Basic Skills, Reading Comprehension Section

Figure 1

students in the average classes used in this study. Results were as follow:

Stanines 1-3 (low ability) = 19% of students in the average class;

Stanines 4-6 (average ability) = 75% of students in the average class;

Stanines 7-9 (high ability) = 6% of students in the average class.

Design

Since the reader-response approach would be used to determine the extent to which students could ascertain social issues in works by Dr. Seuss, the question of the depth to which to reveal the focus of the study to the students was of concern. Rosenblatt's (1938) reader-response theory was used in this study as a first step. The students were given no guidance as to their responses other than to respond to the text read orally to them by the teacher. As the teacher read each Dr. Seuss story, the students responded on their own in a free-writing exercise.

Certain ideas discussed in Chapter 1 were also used as evaluation guides, such as a response worksheet

that was used as a second step in soliciting student responses. This worksheet offered limited guidance through written questions (Appendix A). An even more specific survey was developed also. A matching section concerning Dr. Seuss' theme for each story read was devised in order to more clearly test the students' understanding of the hidden meanings in the works read. This exercise was not based on totally free responses since the issues were revealed outright to the students. This portion of the study took place only after students' free responses were concluded. This follow-up was done to create a further understanding of the issues Dr. Seuss offered. A copy of this worksheet is included as Appendix B.

Procedures

The data for this study were collected over a period of eight school days. There were five Dr. Seuss stories read to the class by the teacher, one each day for five days. Each story dealt with a different social issue that the author, Dr. Seuss, had embedded into the rhyming narration. The stories and their social perspectives were (in order of deliverance):

1) The Cat in the Hat: resistance to authority;

2) The Sneetches: racial prejudice;

3) Horton Hears A Who: rights of minorities;

4) The Butter Battle Book: nuclear war;

5) The Lorax: ecology and conservation

Since a literature unit including a novel, urban legends, folktales, and fairytales had been underway in the classroom, continuing with another genre did not seem unusual to the students. The researcher believed that the students were unable to tell that any sort of research was being conducted. Reader-response had been used previously and was not a new activity for these students.

The Cat in the Hat was chosen as the first book to be read since its meaning seemed to be the easiest to discern. Its theme was familiar to all students--parental authority and resistance to it. The procedure used for this study began with oral reading of the story to each class. This activity was prefaced only with a general explanation that the class was beginning to study a different type of literature which was appropriate for all ages. The students were asked to

pay attention as the story was read and to think carefully about what they heard.

When each story was finished, the students were asked to respond in written form to the literature. They were reminded that their responses were their own. The responses could be composed in any way that conveyed their feelings and had some meaning to them personally.

After the response papers were collected, the activity "Reader Response" (Appendix A) was distributed. This gave them guidance for further response. The remainder of the period was used for written reaction to the story using this form.

The same procedure was followed each day with a different Dr. Seuss story read to the class. The stories were not discussed orally at this point since this dialogue might affect the remaining stories presented.

On the sixth day of the study the "Questions on Dr. Seuss Stories" (Appendix B) was distributed to the students. The first half of each class period was used for written response using this form. This activity was much more specific than the previous lessons on Dr.

Seuss. The social issues found in each story were displayed in a matching-type exercise. The students were also asked to give examples of ways in which Dr. Seuss revealed these themes to the reader.

During the final two days of the study the class discussed each story. The students' own responses were returned to them to refresh their memories on their perception of each story. The teacher briefly reviewed each story and then asked the students to explain their feelings concerning each piece. The students were free to join in the discussion or to remain listeners. As social themes were mentioned, the teacher focused upon these and promoted further response. Themes and social issues were clarified and discussed openly.

The goals of this exercise were to provide closure for the students concerning the Dr. Seuss' literature and to have the students more fully realize the social issues involved. The results derived from the research are discussed in the next chapter. The ways in which average seventh grade students interpreted Dr. Seuss will be examined. Particular emphasis will be developed on the involvement of social issues in

student responses. The social issues noted will be those embedded within Dr. Seuss' stories.

The results of this research will be dealt with in a descriptive manner. The question being considered is the ability of students to use literature to recognize and respond to issues within our society, not the analysis of the social maturity of middle school students. The majority of the analysis will deal with the responses of middle school readers to Dr. Seuss books. The students' recognition of societal issues will be discussed through responses collected in a middle school classroom.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The stories of Dr. Seuss will be used in conjunction with reader-response activities to determine the extent to which middle school students are aware of social issues embedded in specific literature. The five Dr. Seuss books studied focused upon differing social issues. The Cat In the Hat dealt with parental authority, The Sneetches with social prejudice, Horton Hears a Who with the rights of minorities, The Lorax with ecology and environmental destruction, and The Butter Battle Book with nuclear war. The question under study in this research, whether or not students are aware of social issues embedded in Seuss' works, will be explored by examining seventh graders' responses to the books presented. The responses of these students will be the focus of this study. Each book will be examined separately with attention to the actual responses derived from student participants in this study. As discussed in the preceding chapter, three activities involving reader

response were developed for each Dr. Seuss book. The three responses from each student will be combined in discussions for the results obtained.

Piaget (Pillar, 1983) identified two broad aspects of moral development based on maturity: (1) children mature morally as they become more independent of adult restraints placed upon them, and (2) they mature as they interact with peers. Investigations by Kohlberg in 1964 (Pillar, 1983) support Piaget's findings that in the earliest stages, a child's morality is based on obedience, punishment and impersonal forces with his judgment dependent upon immediate, external, and physical circumstances. At this stage of immaturity, the child's main concern is with consequences instead of intentions and what is "right" is determined by obedience to authority. As children mature in their reasoning skills, their moral attitudes become more subjective and concerned with internal norms and values.

Kohlberg (1964) believes that there has developed an increased interest in moral development and that internal moral development and outward socialization has become more obvious. He defines moral judgment "as

the child's use and interpretation of rules in conflict situations and his reasons for moral action, rather than as correct knowledge of rules or conventional belief in them" (Kohlberg, 1964, p. 394). Moral knowledge, according to Kohlberg, seems primarily to indicate intelligence, cultural background, and desire to make a good impression. The particular responses to a moral situation involve thought structures and are the result of a child's interaction with others. Parental training is only influential as a portion of the social process of a child, but social participation is a fundamental factor in a child's social maturity. The classroom and materials used in a learning situation are important in a student's development in a social sense. "Since we know that our students can be influenced by what they read, literary experiences provide an opportunity to foster moral sensitivity and rational analysis, to encourage students to grow in positive ways" (Pillar, 1983, p. 39).

According to Piaget and Kohlberg (Pillar, 1983), there is a relationship between the age of children and their level of moral understanding. Since the moralistic principles evident in Dr. Seuss' works are

under investigation in this research, this premise was considered. This researcher will use this information to help discuss the results found. This study was designed to determine response to literature, not to focus on maturational levels. The use of a discussion of maturity serves strictly to help interpret the responses given by students.

Pillar (1983) presented four dimensions on which a student may base a moral judgment: intentionality, relativism, punishment, and independence of sanctions. An explanation of these terms follows. Intentionality is an act which is judged by the physical consequences, regardless of motive. As a child matures, he can see the acts more clearly in terms of intention. Relativism is the extent to which an act is right or wrong. A more mature child will understand that there may be a diversity in views. Punishment considers whether or not the punishment given reflects the act committed. Older children favor punishments that are logically related to the offense. Independence of sanctions involves the reason that a child gives for why an act is bad: because it will elicit punishment (young child) or it violated a rule (older child).

Piaget adds two other dimensions to this list. These are the use of reciprocity or putting oneself in the place of someone else, and a naturalistic view of misfortune, which is whether punishment comes from God or by natural objects. As a child matures, these dimensions develop and become more clear. These six dimensions seem appropriate in the discussion of moral issues and the ways that a student may interpret literature of a social nature. The study of Dr. Seuss' stories in relation to social issues can be a window into the moralistic attitudes and maturity levels of middle school students.

An examination of each book will now be presented. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of the student participants. Major findings will be discussed in conjunction with the individual books. General conclusions will be in less detail since the response to the specific literature was of primary consideration in this study.

The Cat In The Hat

In this story, Dr. Seuss presented a story concerning the unwanted presence of a mischievous cat

disobedience punishment would occur showed that these students were of a higher level of maturity than those who were simply concerned with a cat. These responses also reflected Piaget's idea that children mature morally as they become more free from adult supervision. Since the students stated in their responses that they had been left alone without parental guidance when the menacing situations took place, the students recognized their independence from adults and became more mature in their perceptions of what could happen to them when left on their own. These responses showed, according to Piaget's terms, increased maturity.

Horton Hears A Who

The rights of minorities was the issue focused upon in Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears A Who. Horton, an elephant, protects minute beings living on a speck of dust. Horton is ridiculed and berated for his attention to the tiny creatures, but still maintains that "A person's a person, no matter how small" (Seuss, 1954, p. 4). The story line, "A family with children just starting to grow" (Seuss, 1954, p. 13) has sparked

recent discussion into the association of saving these tiny people with the prevention of abortion. But Dr. Seuss intended the prevailing issue to be that all people, even minorities, have equal rights.

None of the seventh graders involved in this research mentioned the subject of abortion; this was as expected. Some students responded literally. One student compared the tiny people to ants. Another literal interpretation was: "This story was about a [sic] elephant find [sic] a dust spot and it start to talk to him. Horton was the one who safe [saved] them [sic] town" (Seth). The word "minorities" was not used in any of the responses, but the idea that all people should be treated equally was mentioned. Some students wrote about instances in their own lives when they felt "small" or unwanted, or when they had helped others improve their own self image. "You should always give someone a chance to prove that they are right" (Lori).

Almost all (about ninety percent) of the responses centered on the idea that, as one student stated, "It shows everyone in the world has something they can do" (Rhett). In many of the responses, the idea was stated that all must work together to achieve the best results

and that even the smallest contribution counts. Students spoke of the belief, too, that persons must keep their convictions even in adverse situations. Also, the theme that we should take all people seriously was discussed by approximately one-third of the students. The idea that everyone should be given a chance even if we believe their thoughts are silly was common, too. Mitch said, "I think this really taught the people a lesson to believe. A person is a person no matter how small. And we need to take people serious [sic]."

A caring attitude was a dominant theme from these students. All people should care for each other, try to help everyone in our society, and show kindness to all. Chip said, "I like this story because it shows everyone in the world has something they can do. I think it's like life sometimes, some people are left out that can really help." One student summed up the story by giving the book a new title, Horton Gives A Hoot.

This researcher feels that the social issue with concern for minorities was understood by the students, but that these students were not mature enough in their

language use to express this idea in precise words. A generalization to all people was present rather than the singling out of specific groups. Some races were mentioned, but only by about one-fourth of the students. The negative racial overtones which the researcher felt might show up were not noted, but the responses were evidence of the caring nature and belief in fairness of this adolescent age group. A transescent characteristic is that fairness is extremely important. This quality was brought forth in these responses.

In accord with the stages set up by Piaget and Kohlberg, these students seemed to be somewhat mature in their views. The students understood that a person's intentions were important, not just consequences. It was important to keep on trying, despite the odds of success. Response to the relativism of the act of kindness was evident. People may react in diverse ways to situations and not only one way is correct at all times. There were shades of gray for these maturing students and all was not shown in black or white. It was important for views to change as the situation changed.

The Sneetches

The Sneetches dealt with racial prejudice by involving Star-Belly and Plain-Belly Sneetches. Although the differences in these two groups of Sneetches was not physically of great significance, much was made of one group being superior to the other. The contrasts were indicative of the racial inequities evident in our society.

Almost all of the students recognized the intended theme in The Sneetches. One student said, "It reminds me of real life because you can still be friends if black or white or rich or poor" (Jake). Most of the student responses referred to the idea that friendship can transcend differences. "This story tells of life in a real sort of way. It says no one is better or more perfect than the other" (Wayne). No hostility toward another race was evident, only an understanding that differences must be understood and accepted.

Approximately one-fifth of the students mentioned the money that was wasted by the Sneetches in order to try to be alike. A response which summed up this sentiment well was:

> The story meant to me that it doesn't make a difference what color you are or what you have and what they don't. People spend money to be like everybody else. And it don't [sic] need to be like that cause in the end what's on the inside counts. (Charles)

The students seemed to feel that the lost money was a punishment for the Sneetches' selfish actions. This idea showed a high level of maturity according to Piaget and Kohlberg since the punishment definitely related to the offense.

The students responded with honesty and compassion for others. One student, who is crippled, saw that the story involved more than just racial prejudice. He stated: "We are all the same. I for one am not predudest [prejudiced] like some. I am different in a way that no one will know until I show" (Matt). The students were conscious of the unequal treatment of different racial groups in society, but sought to alleviate it rather than call attention to it. Their responses reflected an awareness of the social issues intended by Dr. Seuss, with a mature attitude towards resolving society's weaknesses.

The responses offered for The Sneetches paralleled the views by Piaget that mature children are able to put themselves in the place of others. The majority of responses given showed that the students could empathize with members of a different racial group and "feel" that prejudice was wrong. This use of reciprocity showed a high level of maturity in the awareness of the students and in an understanding of the literature's social issues through the eyes of others. The students expressed the idea that racial prejudice was wrong because all people are basically the same and have the same feelings, showing that an understanding of these feelings was evident.

The Lorax

The Lorax dealt with the problems associated with destruction of the environment. The Once-ler told the story of the greedy ways of men as they destroyed the Truffula trees for their own gain. As the trees disappeared, so did the remainder of the environment. As the story ended, hope was seen with a single seed that could be nurtured to rebuild a healthy world.

Almost every student understood and commented on the social issues involved in this book. They talked about the destruction of our planet by logging and air pollution. "This is really a good story because, basicity [basically] it's true. People clear cut forests, pollute water and air, kill off all animals just so they can make money" (Lindsey). The problems with pollution from factories was mentioned also. About one-fourth of the students said that money was the basis for this destruction and that some people today were more concerned with their own profits than the maintenance of a safe environment. Amy said, "And the way I see it is, that it's just a huge mistake cause we depend on the environment and without it we'll die, so what good's the money?" One student said, "What good will all that money be if we're not alive to spend it?" (Melissa).

The students expressed ideas which demonstrated that they understood that this social issue was a continuing problem and one with which we should be concerned. They mentioned trees being destroyed in their own community and air pollution in nearby cities. They seemed to feel that there was hope for an

improvement in this situation and that as future citizens, they could be involved in a solution. As Chuck said, "It reminds [me] of when people take one's environment for granite [granted]." The students realized that environmental hazards actually exist today and that efforts must be made to improve.

Intentionality, as defined by Piaget, seemed to be evident in the student responses. The act of ruining the environment was judged by the physical results. But motive was recognized by the students in their comments concerning profit being important to some people. This understanding indicated a high level of social maturity in the students since they could see that a motive was involved. The issue of environmental awareness, as inspired by Dr. Seuss, was evident to these middle school students.

The Butter Battle Book

The social issue presented by Dr. Seuss in The Butter Battle Book was that of nuclear war. In 1984 this threat was of real concern, much more so than today with the students involved in this research. But although nuclear war was not familiar to these

adolescents, the presence of war was well understood. Through relatives and friends, many of these students had real-life experience with the Persian Gulf War. Bill said, "It reminds me of the war we had last year, Desert Storm, because they were trying to take over all the countries that had oil, but we stopped them." The threat of personal harm was not present, as in a nuclear holocaust, but the realities and consequences of a war had been recently dealt with by these students, if only through the news media. Whitney said, "This story was interesting. I liked it a lot. It reminds me of the war we had last year and a lot of men got killed." As Joe expressed it, "But it is history."

Approximately eighty percent of the students mentioned the Gulf War in some way. They related the illustration in The Butter Battle Book to war planes and gas masks that had been shown on television during the Gulf War. Some were reminded of their own experiences with the war and told about particular people they knew who were involved. "In the war last year, I had some cousins and friends, but it was sad. I remember when my cousin had been called and we was

[sic] so sad, but she did write us. But we really did miss her" (Amanda). These students understood some of the hardships incurred through a war of any nature. They were able to see that war is not always the best answer to a problem. "It reminds me of how we have wars over really nothing" (Allison).

The ending of The Butter Battle Book was actually not an ending. The final lines, "We'll see. We will see ..." implied that the story could not be finished. This was the intention of Dr. Seuss since war was not something that could be solved completely. The students responded to this ending in an unfavorable manner. They wanted the story to have an ending, preferably happy. Almost seventy percent of the students commented on the lack of an ending. "This book should have another part and it should be called The Butter Battle Book II" (Gene). This researcher felt that the reason for this was that these students were most familiar with literature of the nature where endings conclude the story in a final manner. The students gave comments such as, "I think there should have been a better ending" (Barbara). "The story was good, but didn't have an ending" (Adam). "Well, I

really in a way didn't like this story cause it lead us to believe that they were going to do something then just left us hanging" (Benji).

Besides the obvious theme of war, many students noticed other social ideas as well. About one-half mentioned that we should be accepting of all people, regardless of their differences from ourselves. "It reminds me of people doing different things than other people..." (Belinda). "I think it doesn't matter how you eat your butter, you should be treated equally" (Stan). The students were aware that society shows inequality for some. They wanted to correct these wrongs.

The use of reciprocity, as discussed by Piaget and studied by Kohlberg (Pillar, 1983), put the student in someone else's place to evaluate a situation from a different point of view. The students were able to achieve this stage in their maturity by having empathy for others in both the experience of war and in society at large. They recognized Dr. Seuss' intentions as well as applying the messages from the story to their own experiences. This process was demonstrated through reader-response.

Conclusion

In summation, the question under investigation in this research dealt with the capability of average middle school students to perceive the social issues embedded in literature by Dr. Seuss. The reader-response method was used to ascertain this information.

The seventy-four students responding to Dr. Seuss showed that they were, for the majority, able to determine the social problems evident in the material presented. Of the five stories to which the students responded, the major issues in all were discovered by most of the students. Each story's major theme was found as shown through reader-response. Oral discussion more clearly emphasized this recognition.

There were varying levels of maturity displayed in regard to the response to the social issues. Some students were able to delve more deeply into the social aspects depicted, but most of the students were at least able to recognize the social implications of each story. Approximately eighty-five percent of the students picked out the social issues that Dr. Seuss placed within his books. Some students were able to name the issue precisely, but the majority stated the

theme in their own words. Both personal and general ideas were related by the students, showing that response was not only of a self-centered nature. The social issues embedded in the Dr. Seuss books were discovered by middle school students.

CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION

The rewards offered by the use of a reader-response technique in the study of literature is evident through the research conducted in this study. As a teacher, there should be displayed an interest in becoming more personally acquainted with one's students and getting to know each student in a caring manner. Reader-response seems to fulfill the need to get closer to the core of a student's emotions and to find out how the student feels about certain issues.

Reader-response is a non-threatening exercise in which students may "talk to" their teacher. Since grammatical and spelling errors are not of significance in a free response, those students who may not feel comfortable with writing assignments are put at ease. If a classroom is developed with freedom and openness, the students will feel that they may truly express their opinions and feelings without criticism or ridicule by peers or adults.

The literature used in this research was enjoyable to the students since they were familiar with Dr. Seuss. Laughter and pleasure were derived from the oral readings presented. Although most often viewed as literature for young children, the Dr. Seuss material offered insight into the understandings of these middle school children and their perceptions of society. The use of unusual literature may be of value to teachers when used with a specific purpose in mind, such as was done in this research. The degree to which these adolescent students responded to "children's" literature was an experience of significance. Other materials may be used in this same manner for a variance in the usual language arts or reading curriculum.

Reader-response can become a positive force in the educational process in middle school. It offers ways to better promote understanding between teacher and student. This method was of benefit in the research conducted and in implications for future use. This research helped develop social awareness in middle school students which is important in today's society. "If teachers believe that schools should prepare

students to play a role in our democracy, the principle of justice must be prized and pursued" (Pillar, 1983, p. 39). By exposing middle school students to various social issues, a quality of justice in society may be discussed and better understood. Reader-response is a tool worthy of use in this endeavor.

Piaget (Pillar, 1983) believed that moral reflection promoted a consciousness towards moral development and that discovery of moralistic values with students caused verification of their own beliefs. Children may be able to express moral dilemmas, recognize alternatives, and consider different points of view by focusing on social issues. Reader-response can help foster this expression.

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Appendix A

Worksheet on Reader-Response

Story Title_____

Name _____

Period _____

Age _____

Reader-Response

1. After reading this story, what can you tell about how this relates to real life?

2. Give an example of something this story reminds you of in your own life or our society today.

3. How can you use these ideas to help in your own life or in society?

4. How do you feel about the topic in this story? Tell me how you <u>feel</u>.

Appendix B

Worksheet on Questions for Dr. Seuss Stories

Name _____

Period _____

Age _____

Questions On Dr. Seuss Stories

A. Match each story with its major theme:

_____ 1. The Sneetches	a. racial prejudice
_____ 2. Horton Hears a Who	b. nuclear war
_____ 3. The Butter Battle Book	c. ecology, conservation
_____ 4. The Lorax	d. rights of minorities
_____ 5. The Cat in the Hat	e. resisting authority

B. For each story matched with its theme above, tell me how Dr. Seuss showed the main idea. What examples in the stories proved the social theme that Dr. Seuss was teaching us?